

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL TRAINING, PART 1 – ENVIRONMENT

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- The Work Station
- Tack and Equipment
- In the Round Pen
- Be aware of how your own body language and verbal commands elicit certain behaviors in your animal
- The Hard Tie Elbow Pull as a restraint and how to use it
- In the Arena
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Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

The mules are in the corral. Welcome to Mule Talk, and I'm Cindy K. Roberts, your host

And our author, TV personality and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges of the Lucky Three Ranch.

We are back on, and I want to say to you, Meredith, that I am grateful, and I thank my lucky stars that we get to bring good content to our listeners. So this podcast, it means a lot to me to have you here.

Meredith Hodges:

It means a lot to me too because that's my focus too, Cindy, to give people good, factual information that will benefit them and their animals.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

This is all important, so... And today we're going to do, *Keys to Successful Training Part One*, which is about your working environment. And I really like this topic.

Meredith Hodges:

I do too, because it really makes a big difference how consistent you are, and whether or not your animal feels comfortable in the training environment. That can only happen if you are consistent, repetitive and have a designated Workstation for your animal. Sometimes it will change a little bit because if you're working with a foal or a new animal, even just leading to a Workstation can be a real challenge. They need time to get comfortable with you. You might have to stay in a smaller pen where you have put the foal and the mare, or where you have put your newly acquired animal. They need the time to get used to you no matter what age they are.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

The small, confined area will be used in preparation for his lessons to come. You'll do easy lessons that you can do in a smaller area without all the details that you will need to address later in the Workstation. It is ideal to have a confined area indoors where you can have a hitch rail, have your tack and equipment inside where it will stay clean and be easily accessible. I started with an old Quonset building. A lot of farms have old buildings that you can adapt to being a Workstation situation. You don't even really have to build a wall to separate the Tack Room if there are four walls around it with an entrance door. All you have to do is put your tack and equipment at one end and sink a hitch rail in the other end where you can tie your animal. It is also handy to store your grooming tools at the end where your equine is tied.

Then you can work inside, no matter what the weather is like. You'll be able to do simple exercises, which in a lot of cases, is just getting them used to the grooming equipment, tack equipment and large enough for simple leading exercises. First, you need to get the equine used to following you on the lead rope. He needs to have enough confidence in your judgment so he will follow you to the Workstation and enter it easily. You don't need to concern yourself with his good posture when you lead him from one place to another in the confined area. He just needs to be willing to follow you well enough to go from the confined area to a Workstation.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

So you want to begin your leading training in the smaller area, and that starts with feeding them when they approach you and rewarding them when they do. This pen is your first Workstation, but it's also going to be the area where you feed them. If it's a foal, teach him how to come to you by carrying oats in your fanny pack strapped around your waist. Granted, when he's really young, he's not going to want the oats, but he will be curious about you. And if Mom is eating in a designated area nearby, the best place for you would be standing at her shoulder. When the foal comes up, you can go ahead and start touching him. Mom won't get anxious about it because you're standing right next to her.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you go stand somewhere else in that pen and want the foal to come to you, then Mom's going to get anxious if the foal wanders away, goes to you and isn't close by her. So you really need to take those kinds of things into consideration.

If you have an older animal that is new, the same rules apply. You want to keep them by themselves in a pen that's near other animals so that they don't feel anxious and isolated. However, with new animals, they should be isolated from your other animals for 30 days to make sure they aren't diseased. They should not be able to get nose to nose with your other animals. Feed the new animal in the same place all the time and at the same time that you ordinarily feed them all.

Feed near the fence that separates them from the other animals so they don't have to go away from the other animals to eat. It should be a double fence with a space in between during quarantine. You don't want them to become anxious, and feel uncomfortable about eating.

If you stand in the area where they're being fed to get them used to you, an older animal will be happy to get the oats that you have to offer out of the fanny pack that you're carrying. Make sure when you're by the fence, it is one with a gate or an escape route and not the fence that separates them.

Be cautious with an animal you don't know. You never know how they're going to react and behave. If you have a mare or a jennet with a new foal, they may take exception to you being in the pen with them and they can get nasty!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

You do need a really easy way to exit quickly. Just think about how you're feeding, where you're feeding and how you're interacting with the animals. In the smaller area, you can consider the things that might happen and plan what way might be the safest approach. Since you only feed the oats mixture at night, they will be happy to accept a reward of a handful of oats to eat with their hay during the day. Stand near their head and close to the escape fence so you can assess what they might do right away. If they're going to reach up to bite you, or if they're going try to strike at you with the front foot, or even whirl around and try to kick you, you've got a few seconds to climb that fence.

Just make that fence close enough so you can avoid injury. Once they figure out that you have the oats, they're going to be friendlier and approach you. Many people think to get them to come to you; you should take a chair into the pen and hope the animal will be curious enough to approach. Well, you could be sitting there for months.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Okay.

Meredith Hodges: (laughs)

There's no real incentive for them to come up to the darn chair. Some people will even sit on the ground, which only puts them more at risk. If the equine decides that you're a predator and he needs to be rid of you in that pen, if he becomes utterly uncomfortable, he might attack you. If you use your common sense and realize that food is a really good motivator for him to come to you, simply offer it from your fanny pack.

Crimped oats are an equine's favorite food and are healthy for him as well...not carrots, not apples, not horse treats! Even to accept the things you're offering, he may take exception anyway and say, "Oh, this feels like a trap to me." They have second senses that we don't have. Well, we have them, but we don't use them. They think if it looks like a trap, feels like a trap, then it probably is a trap. And they're probably right.

Hay on the ground in front of you is a trap, and they'll know it. If you go and stand next to the hay, let them get to the hay first and then start walking to find your position near the escape fence, You will be able to determine how close you can get before they back off that hay pile. When they start to back off, they're telling you, "That's how much space I'm giving you. Stay where you are." (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Take the hint and stand there. Don't try to approach them right away. Just start fiddling with the fanny pack, undo the zipper and play with the oats. And while they're eating their hay, they're going be eyeballing you. When you see them looking at you, this approach will teach you how to read their body language and how they can read yours. This is your first real communication. When you see an eyeball looking at you while you're playing with the oats, ask, "Oh, would you like some of these?" At first, don't extend your hand; just take it out of the fanny pack with oats in your palm.

You'll be able to see whether there is more interest than just looking at you because he will stop chewing the hay and look at you like, "Oh, maybe that looks better." That is your cue to extend your hand a little further. And if he shows more interest, that's an invitation for you to take a step forward towards him. If he backs off a little bit from the hay pile that is his indication that maybe you need to take a step back. We're talking details in communication.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Just play with this approach and when he finally allows you to step up to the hay pile and he has his head up, and his nose to your hand, let him have the oats. While he's chewing, put your hand back into the fanny pack. Take one step backwards to indicate to him that you're not trying to trap him. Pull out another handful. When he's done chewing, if he extends his nose to you, then you can take another step forward and give him the oats. This is the beginning of the small pen training. This is the kind of action that you should be taking with him, and you should never hurry.

Don't even think about introducing the halter yet. If you're in a pen with a shed, you're going have to take your time with him until he fully accepts you being there. He will take the oats from your hand, accept touch on his forehead accept touch on his nose and down their neck. Do this kind of imprint training before you even think about introducing the halter. It could take months. Have you got months of patience to offer? You should. And if you don't, you're going to learn it! You're going end up getting sucked into a chase game that you're going to be playing forever.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yep.

Meredith Hodges:

Who's training who here? Are we really training each other or are we developing a mutual relationship of satisfaction with each other? That's what you should be thinking this training is all about. Once your relationship is mutually satisfying, in the small pen, then you can start thinking about establishing your Workstation. Once he accepts the halter, then you can then start leading him around. If he balks on you, just reach in the fanny pack, and say, "I thought you wanted this." You stop, and then he stops, you offer the oats and he doesn't run off.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You've just commanded his curiosity, that's all.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
(laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yep.

Meredith Hodges:

Mules are very, very curious. And they'll say, "Why is she acting like that?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
"The last time she acted like that I got to eat oats. Well, I think I'll pay attention."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

So when they do pay attention, learn to reward the attention. That's not a treat. That is rewarding the attention. A treat is when you don't command any kind of response from them and then you feed them anyway. Coaxing is very close to bribing, but it's not the same thing. Bribing means you feed them all along for nothing. When they pull against you and run away, then you start feeding them again without asking them to behave, that's bribery.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Coaxing is different. Coaxing is, "Now that I've commanded your attention and rewarded that attention, I'm going to take a step away, and I'm going to encourage you to come to me." You will have to step away a little bit so that he can take a step towards you to be rewarded. And if you don't give him any room to take that step, then you're going end up bribing. Set him up to succeed at what you ask.

If he starts to pull away from you again, or starts to get tense, take your attention away from him, and fiddle with a fanny pack again, which will command his attention again. But you don't take a step towards him, and you don't give him another reward because you've already given him a reward for his attention. And you say, "Oh, well I already showed you what this is, so if you want some more, you have to come over here." And they say, "Oh, I do?"(laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And you say, "Yes, you do. I'm not going go backwards. You have to come forward. And when you do, I'll give this to you." So, if he takes one step toward you, then say, "See, I'm not a liar. I do what I say. I give you what I promise." And you go ahead and give him the handful.

Then you sit there and wait, and that's what's called coaxing. When he's all through chewing just take two steps away, and say, "Are you coming this way?" You try to lead him with his lead rope. If he leads, fine, take as many steps as he will go.

As soon as you feel that tension, stop, look at him and say, "Don't you want to come over here? Do you remember this?" And you reach in your fanny pack, and you show him the oats. And then you tell him again, "No, I'm not coming over there to give it to you. You have to come over here." And then you just hold the tension on the rope and ask him to come to you, again with the same procedure.

Now, one of the posts I did on Facebook was about the Quick Twist. People were really concerned about the Quick Twist because certain ropes won't slide through the halter very easily. It might get stuck tight and cut off their airflow. You need to know what the Quick Twist is and how it operates.

Take your lead rope and feed it forward, through the noseband, over the nose and back through the nose band to your hand. You are still hanging onto the end. If the equine pulls away from you, you just stand still and hold the lead rope. It tightens around his nose, and limits the air going through his nostrils. If he step forward toward you again, it immediately releases the tension.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

It's not meant to be pulled on. This is why it's really important to teach yourself that when there's tension on the lead rope, stop moving and stand still. If you've got an equine that's difficult after you get him used to the halter, and he just won't come with you, take that half-hitch through the noseband and over his nose. When you feel tension, stop and hold the rope taut. The lead rope needs to slide easily and be released when he takes that step forward. It will work properly if you use a soft cotton lead rope and a woven nylon halter with a flat nose band that doesn't tighten up the way a rope halter will.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You can't do this with a rope halter. You need to have a halter that will keep its shape and fits your equine's face. Nylon woven halters are made to uniformly fit the head of the equine. The nose band will not be too snug around the nose. It will lie comfortably around his nose and around the throat latch. There should be enough of a gap under the nose band for the cotton lead rope to just slide through easily. You stand still like a post. You do not move. If the equine backs up, it gets taut. When he steps toward you, it will loosen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Don't give him any slack. If you give him slack, there is no immediate release of the tension and you can get sucked into a tugging match.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Anything unpredictable or abrupt movement is going cause anxiety and resistance. So, you just act like a non-threatening post. "This is what I'm going to do when you're going to pull back." Then, reach in the fanny pack with your free hand, "And this is what I'm going to do when you don't pull back."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Very clear communication. This is all simple verbal communication and body language. This is how you learn to primarily speak body language between the two of you. When you're in the small pen, one thing that you can do when he doesn't follow is to just tie him to the nearest stout post. You never tie your equine with the Quick Twist employed! Just tie his lead rope to the stout post then and walk away from him. He will turn to look at you and say, "Where are you going?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:(laughs)

And you'll say, "I don't know. You're not being very pleasant to be around right now, so I think I'll leave. You wanted to leave, but I'm the one that's going leave here." Then you just walk away for a few minutes, stand there and look at him and play with the oats. When you've got his attention again, just walk back over there and start again.

There should be about three feet of slack in the lead rope where you tied him. Just reach over and grab the lead rope, and say, "Come here, come to me." and ask for a step towards you. If he yields a step towards you, then give him some oats. If he doesn't, just drop the lead rope, go away again and say,, "I told you that you have to come to me, and you can't act like I'm the devil, so I'm leaving. If you think so little of me, I'm leaving; I won't bother you because you obviously don't want to be bothered."

Then walk away and go play with the oats again. Say this just loud enough so he can hear, "Oh my, this is fun. Wouldn't you rather have these oats than be pulling against me?" And then you walk back to him. This verbal communication that you're giving in baby language has a great effect on him too. That kind of language doesn't sound so threatening to them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You walk back over, and you say, "Did I hear you say that you wanted some of this?" Well, come here then." And you give him a couple tugs on the rope again. If he takes the step forward, then you give him the oats. If he still takes a step back and this is the second try. You say, "Well, I can see that you're very adamant about not interacting with me, so I will give you some time to think about it." You walk away and this time, you leave the pen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
Go away for about 10 or 15 minutes, then come back to the gate and say, "Did you miss me?" (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Then go into the pen and show him the oats again make sure you've really got his attention. If you do, walk over to him and give a little tug on the rope. Nine times out of 10, he'll give you that first step and you can reward him for it and say, "Oh, good, that's good."

Then you can untie the rope. When you untie the rope, give a little tug, and back away a little bit. If he comes along, you can give him some more oats. Play this game of coaxing and rewarding but avoid treats and bribery for no apparent purpose. That's the difference between those terms.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Always use the same principles you learned and taught him in the smaller pen every time you are leading your equine.. When your equine starts following you easily anywhere you want to go and lets you put the halter on and take off the halter without running from you, it's time to begin taking your equine to the Workstation. You can use any number of places. A small shed with four walls and a door is sufficient. I discourage you from making the Workstation a place that's out in the open because that just invites him to bolt and run.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You want the equine to be curious, to look around himself and see, "This is not about bolting and running. This is about doing some exercises here" It's called grooming and getting used to tack and all that you have practiced in the smaller pen. Also, going into an enclosed Workstation is similar to being loaded into a trailer. He's in a confined space and he needs to learn to trust you before he'll go in.

The Workstation is going to be convenient for you to continue your training, doing the grooming, fitting tack and equipment and all that goes with it. I call this *imprinting* because that's really what it is. You'll have this designated and enclosed space with your tack at the back of the room. They can either see the whole room, or you can put in a wall and door to split off the tack area. When you first take him in there, walk him around the room and let him see everything. Show him that there is no need to be afraid of it.

There is a lot of training you can do in the small pen and even in the Workstation like putting smaller obstacles in there, like ground rails, tires in or other things that might spook him at first. But don't leave the obstacles in his pen. Don't make him live with the obstacles. Just do the approach, coax and reward for the tasks when accomplished. You can apply the same techniques when you get into any enclosed area. At first approach to the Workstation, he will probably balk and refuse to go in. You will need to coax him into it. Then lead him around the room and reward him for being curious about the new environment.

And if you've got tack on the wall on the far side, he's going wonder, "What is all that junk? Why do you keep all that junk piled in this room? I can't see it all at once. There's too much of it." But, again, (laughs) you just walk as far as you can. When you feel tension on the line, stop, coax him and reward him. Just do this all the way around the room if necessary. The first time you do it, don't go any further than he is willing to go. When you manage a complete rotation around the room, stop reward and say, "You have been wonderful," and lead him back to his pen and turn him loose. Don't spend any more than 30-40 minutes on any lesson. And always clean up everything you used during the lesson and put it away in its place.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

If you drill on anything, they're going get tired of it, and they're going to say, "I know this game. I don't want to play anymore."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You don't want him to reach that point of total boredom. First time, every time you enter that room, you should walk around it because you might have put something new at the back of the room that he will see, something that you forgot about. He WILL see it. So let him see it. Not a big deal. If he knows that you're going to let him see it, he will be less likely to drag you back out of the building and go run where he wants.

The Workstation is a great place to work with your equine. When you put a hitch rail into this area, make sure it's sunk in concrete and is a strong hitch rail. I've got metal hitch rails in mine, but six-inch rails also work well. It's worth the added expense to do it. You're going to be using it a lot. This is a major tool in your training program, so don't cheat on expenses or materials. It will pay for itself over time. It's going to be a place where the equine will earn to be vacuumed. This is the place where the noisy vacuum, if you have one, will be introduced. I suggest you invest in an equine vacuum. It's healthy for equines to be vacuumed. It promotes circulation and it's a great way to get him super clean. With a Dandy Brush, however, you can see a lot of dust coming off of their body. There's a lot of dust that doesn't come off. Every time I am going to saddle my equine, I use the vacuum cleaner. If I'm just doing a quick grooming, I don't use the vacuum cleaner. I don't want him to get sick of it. The noise alone is enough to irritate me. I figure it'll probably irritate him too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

Just don't overdo it. Clippers can also make them very upset. Sometimes, you have to use the restraint that I use called Face Tie. It's not like the Quick Twist because it just goes twice through the noseband around the hitch rail and is tied off with a hard tie. You can find videos about the restraints I use on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under TRAINING/TRAINING TIPS #26, #27, #36 and #50.

It explains all about how to convince the animal to get up to the hitch rail close enough so you can tie that noseband right to the hitch rail with the use of the Face Tie. That's why you need a very well secured hitch rail, so if he pulls, he can't pull it up out of the ground or break it.

You might need to use the Face Tie when you first teach him to stand still for clipping around the head and neck. You can tie his face to the hitch rail because he will respect it and hold still. The most he might do when you're trying to use the clippers behind his ears and on his face is turn his head to the side and try to avoid you. But with a firmly secured hitch rail, and he is securely Face-tied right to the hitch rail; he can't get away. You have the luxury of either standing right next to him, if he's a fairly calm animal, but if he's one that likes to fight back, you can go to the other side of the hitch rail and reach him from there. It puts you out of kicking or striking range.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

There are two ways to tie the Face Tie. If you need to give shots, there is a specific way to tie to the hitch rail where you include a loop around the throat latch as well. This makes him stand sideways to the hitch rail so you can approach him from either side. He can't swing his hindquarters sideways enough to reach you because his face and neck are secured to the hitch rail in two places. He must keep isbody straight while standing parallel to the hitch rail. You can look up the details on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under Training/ Training Tips # 27 and under MULE CROSSING: RESPONSIBLE USE OF RESTRAINTS.

The restraints I use are completely humane. Do not use these hard tie restraints on a horse. They just won't cooperate. They will fight them and become dangerous. I do exactly the opposite with the horses and keep them on a loose lead rope. And if I tie them up at all, I tie them with the end of the lead rope and leave plenty of slack. That way, they've got six feet of slack on that rope. They're allowed to go back and away from me if they want to.

Generally speaking, I don't like to tie the end of the lead rope to the hitch rail because if the horse feels any tension at all, he will start to fight it. Horses can be kind of stupid if they feel the tension, they will immediately pull back and go over backwards. There is a very specific way to secure them in the Elbow Pull as well for the same reason. You secure the Elbow Pull by looping itself in a loose knot across their back so it will slide loose with any tension at all. You can find details on my website under TRAINING /TRAINING TIP #36.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

So, it's better not to hard tie horses and ponies at all. If you have a confined Workstation, then it doesn't matter if they get loose .and walk around the room trying to avoid you. You can still follow and say, "Are you done yet?" (laughs) Then catch them again.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Reach in the fanny pack and show him the oats. "If you are done, we can continue." And if he comes over to you, then give him the oats reward. Then, proceed with what you were doing, clipping or vacuuming. Cords on the equine vacuum cleaner are very long, so you can even reach the animal from across the room if necessary

A lot of people complain about equines damaging each other's manes and tails during mutual grooming. People prefer to roach the manes on mules. When you are driving single mules and teams, the hair grows up and out like a fountain. It grows straight up in the air and falls on both sides. It's kind of crazy and can get tangled up in the harness. During mutual grooming, they tend to munch on the hair, so it gets uneven and falls out. You will often end up with a mane that looks like somebody just chewed on it...and they probably did! I think people roach their manes for their own convenience. Personally, I prefer beautiful manes and tails on horses, mules, and even donkeys. They do have stiff hair that insists on growing straight up.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Some manes do look pretty crazy? However, if an equine wants to look insane, well, okay, then I will do my best during grooming to tame those wild manes! They also like to chew on each other's tails. I just use Johnson's Baby Oil, sprinkled lightly in their manes and tails during weekly grooming and brush it through the hair with a human, multi-bristled plastic hairbrush.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

I usually groom once a week. Sometimes grooming is more extensive than other times. Sometimes in the summertime you can get away with just a quick application of Johnson's Baby Oil in the manes and tails. The baby oil will train the hair to lie down as much as you can on a wild mane. The other thing it will do is keep the equines from chewing on each other's manes and tails. They will tend to bite on the withers, on the neck, on the shoulder, on the butt and other places, but they don't like the taste of the baby oil. Contrary to popular belief that baby oil will make their hair greasy, it actually protects the hair shafts and promotes better growth. There are a lot of products out there that they say will discourage the chewing. I swear that I have tried them all and they just don't work. Johnson's Baby Oil is the only thing I found that really works well.

In the springtime, you will have a problem with mud and grooming. If your mule is covered from head to tail with mud, he's just letting you know that he has no interest in being ridden! So just leave him alone. When he's ready, he will roll on dry ground, or in the grass, to start breaking the mud off his body. That is your signal that he is now ready to be ridden. You can then groom him so your saddle can be placed on a clean body.

I learned this a long time ago when *Mae Bea CT*, who never, ever liked getting dirty, decided she didn't want to go riding ALL the time. She had been showing extensively and finally decided that she really wanted to rest more often than I realized. So, she began covering herself from head to tail with mud. When she was covered in mud and I went to get her, she would turn her head to me and just smile!(laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Whoa.

Meredith Hodges:

I didn't want to expend the energy getting mad, so I replied, "Well, if you're that adamant about it, we don't need to ride today." Then I just turned her out, and we were both happy. Negotiation with an equine is a two-way street!

The next day I returned and she had effectively rolled in the grass. She got rid of most of the mud that she had on her body the day before. The grass will just rub on it until the mud falls off. Then you don't have as much mud to scrape off. Still, you may still have some mud to remove, especially in the spring, because they can't get it all. When the mud is this bad, you will be forced to use a shedding blade. Be VERY careful when you use the shedding blade so it does not damage the hair and create split ends. That is also the reason for using the multi-bristled human hair brush when they are shedding. The shedding blade will damage the hair where the human hairbrush will not. When I use a metal shedding blade with teeth on one side and a smooth blade on the other side, I carefully use the teeth side to remove patches of mud and the smooth side, if I decide to bath them.

When I give them a yearly bath in July, I will bathe them with water only and scrape off the excess water during hosing with the smooth side of the shedding blade. I don't use soap anywhere on their body. I do use TRESemme shampoo and the Aussie 3X conditioner on the mane and tail just to keep the moisture in their manes and tails. I didn't even have to use soap when I was showing them because the proper feeding and weekly grooming keeps their hair coat shiny and healthy all by itself.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I found that artificial products that they recommend for a shiny coat only add residue in the hair coat.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

Even when I wash my own hair, I don't like using gels or anything that won't completely wash out. It just makes my hair look and feel dull, dry, sticky and stiff. It promotes split ends and keeps the hair from looking truly healthy.

When using the shedding blade, keep in mind that you want a healthy hair coat. You need to know how to use those teeth on a shedding blade very carefully when removing the mud. If there's a lot of mud, don't even go there. Go ahead and wait for a day or two for most of it to be rubbed off by your equine. He will do it in the dirt or grass, and the Pea Gravel in their pens won't compromise the hair. This is Mother Nature in action!

If you artificially groom him, then do it with some finesse. With each patch of mud, use your shedding blade like you would brush your hair. Start at the bottom of a small patch of hair and work your way up. You do the same thing on the mud patches. You start at the bottom, underneath and work your way up with the shedding blade. I use plastic human hairbrushes with a lot of bristles on them when not dealing with mud. I don't use the ones with sparse bristles. I use those that have a lot of plastic bristles on them with balls on the ends of the bristles.

If you work from the top down, it will split the hair and aggravate your equine. Start from the bottom with the hair, or mud patch, and just do a small area at a time. Do maybe an eighth of an inch wide, scrape that off, brush it out and take only small patches at a time until you reach the top.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

All right. Yeah, that's good to know.

Meredith Hodges:

This approach employs some of those silly details that my mules taught me by moving away from me, and swinging back and forth during grooming. They would even try to kick me if I got too rough when I tried to start from the top. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

They do have ways of telling you, "You need to be more polite with the grooming tools."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

The same thing when you're giving a bath, for instance. Be careful not to get water in their eyes or in their ears.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

When I spray water, I always put my hand over their ears and flatten them to the neck. Then I take the sprayer and start on the forehead. I spray the forehead, so the water runs onto their face and downward. It rolls off their eyes and not into their eyes. The same thing goes with the nostrils. I will hold my hand right at the base to keep the ear closed and stabilized. I can still direct the spray over tops of the ears and it'll wash the dirt off the tips of the ears and down the neck.

I do the whole animal that way. I start at the front and move my way to the back. It can be kind of cool outside, so, in my Workstation, have a warm-water spigot to hook up to the hose. I use the hose if they get too much mud up their legs, or on their tails and manes. I don't always want to take them outside to use a hose.

I would rather have a hose inside where it's warmer during cold weather. Even if the Workstation is just a shed with no water, you can still put a hydrant right outside the shed and hook up a long enough hose to reach inside. There are different ways you can set up your Workstation. It doesn't have to be as fancy as the one I have. It took years to build the Workstation the way I wanted it. Until then, I worked out of an old rusty Quonset hut with rubber mats on the floor. We sunk holes into the concrete for the hitch rail posts.

When you're introducing your equine to tack and equipment, you should make things routine and consistent. Always introduce each piece of tack and equipment by allowing him to sniff it before putting it on. Even when he is still young, you can introduce him to the bridle and a light-weight saddle. First, don't do any more than put it on and take it off. Then do it to adjust your tack and equipment, so it fits the animal every time. Keep in mind that he will be growing and changing shape, so you do need to check it every time you use it. It's also a great reinforcement for him to learn to stand still while you work on him.

If you're holding a small saddle, or holding the bridle and he moves, take a step back, wait for him to stand still and then offer the crimped oats and say, "Oh, you want some of this?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

"Now that you're standing still, I'll give it to you." You want to make sure that everything is okay before you try to slide that saddle on his back or put the bridle over his head. You want him to always stand still when you're working on him. People ask me, "Well what if my mule is pawing? What if he won't stand still and he moves around a lot."

I guarantee that if you set the standard of, "I'm only going to ask you to stand still when I'm working on you." Then it doesn't matter what he is doing when you're not working on him. If you're going to get the saddle and he starts pawing and moving around, just ignore him. When you get back with the saddle, just tell him, "Whoa!!" If you have been consistent with your communication with him, he will stand still when you approach him and you can reward him. Any time he is moving around, shoving you out of the way, or doing any unacceptable behaviors, just take a step back, reach in your fanny pack. Look straight at him and say, "Don't you want this?" (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
You bet.

Meredith Hodges:

He will know what that means with, or without the tack and equipment. You're building good habits here, very important behaviors. He will learn that when you're stepping back, that means you don't want to come to him. You don't want to interact with him because he is not standing still. This all takes place in the Workstation first for a reason. Standing still, being docile and calm with no anxiety are behaviors that need to be cultivated to become normal behaviors. They can only become normal behaviors when you're consistent and repetitive in a controlled environment over a long period of time.

After you get him used to the confined space and the Workstation, then it's time to take him into the arena to learn about the Hourglass Pattern to begin his postural core strength work in a good equine balance. You can find more detailed information about the Hourglass Pattern tasks on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under TRAINING/TRAINING TIPS #4, #36 and #122, under TRAINING/TRAINING/ CHASITY'S CHALLENGES and under TRAINING/MULE CROSSING: MC - HOURGLASS PATTERN - ELBOW PULL.

First, you will need to introduce your equine to the Elbow Pull at the Workstation. It will be put on with your drop nose Snaffle bit and light saddle or surcingle. You will put on the halter over the bridle and attach your lead rope for leading exercises in the Hourglass Pattern to your halter.

You will adjust the Elbow Pull so that his head can go as high as he wants to raise it above the withers, but he is not allowed to raise his head high enough to hollow his back and neck. See Our MULETALK PODCAST: A BIT ABOUT COMMUNICATION.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Now you'll take him to the open area where you have four cones in the four corners of the arena, Start your leading exercises in the Hourglass Pattern. Tack up your animal in a surcingle (or lightweight saddle), a snaffle bridle with a drop noseband (with a ring underneath to attach to the lead rope) and our “Elbow Pull” self-correcting postural restraint.

Adjust the Elbow Pull so it is taut enough to keep his head from going so high that he inverts his neck and back, and not so tight that it pulls his head too low. Begin the “Hourglass Pattern” on the lead rope without doing circles at the cones. Lead your animal with the lead rope in your left hand from the left side with your equine’s head at your shoulder when tracking left, and lead your animal with the lead rope in your right hand with your equine’s head at your shoulder when tracking right. Point your left hand (or right hand) in the direction of travel and look where you are going. Say the animal’s name to command his attention and give the command to “Walk on.”

Then look down to see what foot he is leading with and match your steps with his. When you stop, say “And...Whoa” and stop with your feet together. Turn to his shoulder, square him up with both hind legs together and then put both front legs together with equal weight over all four feet. Then reward him from a fanny pack of oats around your waist. Stand quietly until he has finished chewing and never hurry! Change the leading sides (and leading position) after every halt so you are always leading from the “inside” of the arc on which you are traveling, and give the command to “Walk on.” Once he is leading this way, make it the ONLY way you lead him going forward. It will support his postural balance and self-carriage. You can add circles at the cones and add ground rails between the Cone Gates in the middle once he is consistently walking at your shoulder and is prompt with his response.

This postural core strength work in the Hourglass Pattern will take you from 3 – 6 months depending on how old he is, how experienced he is, how he is naturally conformed and how he carries himself. Equines that have very poor conformation and a bad way of moving will take more time to build the core muscles at the base of the skeleton.

Remember that it's not just the muscles you're conditioning. It affects the tendons, the ligaments, the connective tissues, the cartilage and to promote even wear of the cartilage within the joints. This is why we address postural core muscle strength in good balance, so the animal will learn to move correctly. We do these exercises so all the bones in his body can move correctly and are substantially supported by all these different elements.

We are not talking about building bulk muscle. That is quite different. So learn to be patient and willing to take your time. It will take about two years of groundwork to develop and condition his body properly. When you're developing core strength, you can't do it with just a few months of training.

This takes a long time. First it takes time with leading training in the Elbow Pull in the Hourglass Pattern for about 3 months and then adding coordination to it with obstacles for another 3 months. He will learn Lunging Training without, and with the Lunge Line, in the Round Pen. While still in the Round Pen, he will learn Ground Driving and Lunging in the Drive Lines. He will learn Halts, Turns and the Rein Back in the Drive Lines both in the Round Pen and later in the Open Arena, all done in the Elbow Pull so he can maintain good posture at all times, and throughout all movements. All these things still need to be done in confined areas just in case he finds things difficult and decides to bolt and run.

Essentially, to build this core will take you roughly nine months to a year to complete, and so you should be patient and meticulous. If you want to do this right, you're going to learn patience, and your animal will appreciate it because he is going to feel better. You won't have any resistance to the things that you're asking him to do because you're preparing him for every step with the steps before. And they're not big steps. If there's a big gap, and you're getting resistance, back up to the previous lessons. Repeat them because it just means it didn't take at the level of the skeleton.

Hoof health is extremely important. I learned a lot about hoof health when my Draft mule, Roll contracted White Line Disease in 2016. Now that my animals are all pretty much over 30 years old, we put Hoof Power in the oats mix all the time. And the amounts are on the bags that you can get. We get the big bags. I'm sure they offer it in smaller quantities, but that product has been phenomenal. Even my animals that have light-colored hooves have good hard hooves with no stress rings in them. And I keep them barefoot unless I'm using them extensively. We only get them shod when they actually need it and are fitted with the appropriate kinds of shoes. So their hooves aren't chipping or cracking. They all have truly healthy hooves!

What's critical is to have your runs, small pens, and your smaller turnout areas bedded three to four inches in pea gravel and not anything else. If you bed the areas with sand, they can sand colic. Pea gravel is round and doesn't chip feet like structural fill or anything with bigger rocks in it. You shouldn't just leave the areas in dirt because that kind of surface isn't hard enough to keep the hooves hard and healthy. The hooves need to be stressed to stay hard and healthy as do the bones. For the hooves to stay hard, you need a good hard surface in their living areas. Pea gravel is hard enough; it promotes good drainage and is soft enough for them to lie down on without causing pressure sores. This minimizes the issues with mud, which can soften and compromise the condition of the feet.

All maintenance and training practices are important and serve a purpose when done correctly. When you move to the Round Pen, if you've done adequate Postural Core Strength exercises around the skeleton, they will be in balance for Round Pen work.

The size of the Round Pen needs to be beneficial to your training program. A Round Pen that is too small will put too much stress on the Postural Core Strength and balance of your animal. It needs to be large enough to allow the equine to travel easily in good posture. Smaller circles are a lot more difficult in the beginning stages of training. Be sure the Round Pen is not so large that you cannot reach the animal with your lunge whip. I have found that the ideal sized Round Pen is 45 feet in diameter. The floor of the Round Pen needs to be completely flat to affect training properly.

When I was lunging multiple animals, I discovered that some had difficulty maintaining their postural balance. I didn't realize that the ground was not as flat as I had thought it was. That's when I noticed that my Round Pen was actually going downhill.

When it snowed, as the snow began to melt, it would get dry on the high side and puddle up on the low side. So, we tore it down, shot it with a transit, excavated and rebuilt it. Since then, I haven't had any problems with the animals traveling out of good equine posture. If you've worked for a whole year to get that good posture to prepare for work in the Round Pen, you will need a Round Pen that is built over flat ground, or it will undo all your work with your equines. They won't ever be ready for you to ride if you've undone all the core strength training and proceeded with inferior posture. If they do not have to worry about their good posture, they will be able to easily learn the tasks that the Round Pen has to offer like new verbal commands, new body language, working at all three gaits with turns and Rein Backs. They will be able to provide ultimate performance. Does that Make sense?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Sure does.

Meredith Hodges:

You might want to take a look at the article that I wrote on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/THE ROUND PEN. There are a lot more details about how to build it so it is functional and easy to maintain. Our new Round Pen has easily removable boards, spaces between the boards for easy exiting and is lined with angle iron so they can't chew on the boards. I guess you could call me anal. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Bed the Round Pen with three to four inches of soft dirt or sand. When you first begin with animals that lack enough conditioning, it's probably better to go with three inches. Later, as they become better conditioned and you would like to make things more difficult for them, you can add another inch to make them work harder to make them stronger still, if that makes sense?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

When lunging you animal, be sure to watch your own body language and see how that affects your animal because there's a lot of things to learn about body language. Just make sure every move you make and he makes is perfect communication. Don't be sloppy. Don't ever let him go in an unrestricted frame. Make sure he's got that Elbow Pull on all the time.

Is he putting equal weight over all four feet? Is he arching his body from head to tail? Is he traveling smoothly? Are his back legs going into his front hoof prints at the Center of Gravity? If there is tension between his nose and his chest with the Elbow Pull, he's out of balance and he's having difficulty. The Elbow Pull will remain tight until he finds his good postural balance. When he is in good posture, it's going to be loose and stay that way.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

He will learn to Ground Drive and later carry a rider in the Round Pen in the Elbow Pull. When the Elbow Pull remains loose, he can graduate to the Open Arena and be Ground Driven and then, ridden through the Hourglass Pattern later in the Open arena. Teach him all the rein cues and directional cues. You will get your own rhythm and cadence in sync with his body movements that will prepare you for riding smoothly in the Round Pen before you go into the Open Arena. When you ground drove him in the Round Pen, you followed his back legs in sync with his rhythm and cadence. When you mounted him in the Round Pen, you already taught your own body to follow his body movement. The only thing left for your equine to learn is to get used to moving away from the pressure from your legs.

In the Hourglass Pattern, you learned how to get in sync and develop good postural balance, verbal commands and body language. During obstacle training, you added coordination together in the Hourglass Pattern in the Open Arena. In the Round Pen, he learned more Body Language, Postural Balance on Circles, Turns, “S” Turns, Directional Changes and Rein Backs at faster gaits while Ground Driving and being ridden.

He learned to lunge in the confined space and later in the open arena. The exercises have been consistent although done for different purposes, but in a rather limited number of spaces so he can stay calm and accepting...no surprises due to a drastic change of environment. He is familiar with the routines. By the time he encounters more drastic challenges, he will be confident in his body and be trusting of your judgment. If he becomes unsure at any point, he will simply stop and look back at you for guidance.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Under saddle in the Hourglass Pattern, you can add more advanced exercises with and without your reins and stirrups. You can modify the pattern to only include the short sides of the arena and the long sides. You can practice Collection and Lengthening on the short and long sides of the arena at Walk, Trot and Canter. As you modify exercises even further, he will become more attentive to your aids

One thing builds on the other, but you're always approaching him the same way in each of these areas. All the way from the Confined Small, to the Workstation, to the Open Arena Hourglass Pattern, to the Round Pen and then back to the Open Arena again, both in on the Lead Rope, in the Drive Lines, and then eventually Under Saddle. Everything is predictable and is done resistance free with your equine because you build it all with very small steps forward..

And that's why it's so important to have designated work areas and use them in a calculated, consistent and repetitive way every single time you train. Because the more easily the animal can recognize what's coming next, the more you lower the incidence of anxiety and resistance. It helps you both stay focused. And I might say at this point t, AN ARENA WITHOUT CONES IS LIKE A HOUSE WITHOUT FURNITURE!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Well, you're right about that. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs) Right? Well, would you know what to do in an empty room-... or would you start looking around and getting all anxious? (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah, yeah, there you go. This has been very educational. And, Meredith, I can't wait for us to talk again. So you have a really good rest of your day, and we will talk soon.

Meredith Hodges:

Sounds great, Cindy.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Meredith's website is luckythreeranch.com, and you can call her at +1 800-816-7566. And I can be reached through my website. Everycowgirlsdream.com. Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

RESOURCES:

WEBSITE at www.LuckyThreeRanch.com /TRAINING:

- 1) Another Augie & Spuds Adventure
- 2) Chasity's Challenges
- 3) Longears Music Videos
- 4) Mule Crossing Articles
- 5) Mule Facts
- 6) Podcast Appearances
- 7) Training Tips
- 8) Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue
- 9) What's New With Roll?
- 10) Video On Demand

11) Wrangler's Donkey Diary

BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:

- 1) Training Mules & Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Training
- 2) A Guide to Raising & Training Mules
- 3) Donkey Training
- 4) Training Without Resistance
- 5) Equine Management & Donkey Training
- 6) Equus Revisited Manual
- 7) Equus Revisited Video
- 8) Rock & Roll Documentary
- 9) Building the Jasper Carousel
- 10) LTR Hay Production
- 11) The Road to Bishop
- 12) The Bishop Experience
- 13) The Bishop All Stars
- 14) Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding
- 15) Building of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge
- 17) For Children: www.JasperTheMule.com for books & videos